Gender-leisure nexus through a social justice lens: The voice of women from Iran

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ABSTRACT

Leisure is recognised as offering individuals a chance for relaxation, self-development, social interaction, and wellbeing. However, women's participation and experience of leisure in many developing countries are constrained by gender stereotypes and gender-based inequalities. This study aims to investigate the interrelationship of gender, leisure and issues of social justice and equity in the developing country of Iran. This study also demonstrates how constraints to access and participation in leisure activities can further reinforce Iranian women's socioeconomic disadvantage. Twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted to explore women's narratives of leisure activities and their perceptions of leisure in/equality. The findings reveal that issues such as society norms, cultural mythology and traditions, household and parental responsibilities, personal safety, and crises can restrict women's leisure in Iran. The implications of this study focus on transitional steps for societal changes to reduce marginalisation and bring into being a more inclusive and just society for women.

1. Introduction

Research on the relationships between gender and leisure has grown consistently over the last few decades (e.g Bologna & Staffieri, 2021; Yerkes et al., 2020). Differences between men and women's access to leisure is indicative of enduring forms of gender inequality and injustice in society. It has been found that access to leisure has a strong gender dimension, since power asymmetries between men and women can lead to unequal participation (Saadatifard et al., 2019; Salehi et al., 2021). It is argued that women have less and lower quality leisure time because of ongoing household and parental responsibilities or responsibilities for the care of others (Chatzitheochari & Arber, 2012; Rezania et al., 2021). Gender differences in access to quality leisure is also seen as a reflection of differences in individual norms between men and women in different contexts (Yerkes et al., 2020). For instance, presence of such inequality and asymmetry in power between different groups has been found to undermine sustainability values (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Mkono et al., 2021).

The tenets of social justice can provide a contextual framing to understand inequalities and injustice in leisure access. For instance, Jeanes and Trussell (2021) call for leisure scholarship drawing on a critical social justice lens to examine social issues leading to leisure inequality. It

is particularly important as the relationships between individuals and power relations within their context depend on factors such as norms, culture, national practices, and government policies. In examining such complex relationships in the leisure landscape, however, the focus must shift from only measuring income, job or (re)distributive notions of justice to recognition, procedural and even restorative justice. While such an approach might be useful to demonstrate the allocation of resources, it fails to recognise power asymmetries, exclusion, discrimination, and gender inequality in leisure. Such factors were found to severely affect women's leisure particularly in the developing countries (Floro & Komatsu, 2011; Marphatia & Moussié, 2013; Shirvani, 2017; Uvinha et al., 2017).

Despite more than three decades of research on women and leisure, this group still faces many challenges to access and participate in leisure activities (Henderson & Gibson, 2013; Long et al., 2017). Critical justice research, therefore, is required to promote social change for women (Long et al., 2017; Trussell & Jeanes, 2021). Such research addressing gender injustice in leisure, should not focus on the expertise of those who occupy a position of privilege (e.g., white, men, western), but instead tell the story of those who experience inequality, marginalisation and oppression in their everyday lives.

Recognising that the leisure-gender nexus lacks the conceptual basis

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to analyse gender gaps and access to leisure from a justice perspective, this study aims to use a social justice lens to investigate the interrelationship of gender, leisure and issues of social justice and equity. In addition, while scholars primarily in the global north examine and expand the meaning of leisure for women, research investigating the leisure experiences and issues from the perspective of women in the developing countries can provide a different perspective on cultural dimensions of leisure. Consequently, this research focuses on amplifying the voices of women from a country in the global south by including their stories, leisure experiences, diverse cultural perspectives, and justice narratives. To achieve this aim, empirical data were collected by interviewing women living in the developing country of Iran. As an emerging nation that has experienced decades of strict gender segregation policies, little is known about leisure involvement and constraints of women in the country with only a few scholars reporting on the existence of inequality and injustice for women's access and quality of leisure in Iran (Rezania et al., 2021; Shirvani, 2017). However, more in-depth interpretative studies are required to provide a better understanding and meaning of the challenges Iranian women are facing in their everyday lives (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Rezaie et al., 2017). This research further examines how constraints in access to quality leisure may further reinforce Iranian women's socioeconomic disadvantage. The implications of this research will provide the opportunity to a) hear the voice of Iranian women through their personal narratives and b) for integrating gender and a justice perspective to engender tourism and leisure policies for a more just, inclusive, and sustainable future.

2. Women and leisure–obstacles and challenges

The quality of leisure is directly affected by the level of participation in leisure activities (Uvinha et al., 2017). While participation in leisure for some might be an indication of privilege, for many others it is associated with marginalisation, gender discrimination and exclusion. Power differences between individuals and groups are part of the everyday encounters that can lead to such inequality in leisure. Frias and Dattilo (2020) discuss this in terms of social inclusion and exclusion when power relationships among members of society affecting leisure and its associated perception results in dominant groups or individuals controlling access to leisure. In this vein, social inclusion refers to accessing, participating, and even controlling social activities, whereas social exclusion refers to marginalised groups being denied access to such activities by people in positions of power. However, it should be noted that in most cases, the link between such power asymmetries and access to leisure may not be visible. For example, it is argued that women have less and lower quality leisure because of ongoing domestic and parental responsibilities or the responsibility for the care of others (Chatzitheochari & Arber, 2012). Therefore, women can be more constrained compared to men when society assigns certain gender roles to them (for example, identified as the primary caretakers of children). This argument unveils the systematic force in society to understand how different forms of power can be connected to women's leisure experiences. Unequal distribution of responsibilities as a result of power differences can give priority to one group at the cost of limiting the benefits to the other group. This is the case when the work and leisure distribution of the family is mainly based on the power relations between men and women and not based on equal rights (Kamp Dush et al., 2018). In this case, even equal access to leisure services does not guarantee equal participation in leisure activities as many women lack adequate free time to experience leisure.

The dominant and privileged group may not be aware how they are contributing to the marginalisation of others and creating an unjust structure. In many countries in the global south with conservative gender norms, certain values and beliefs in society or families traditionally assigns household responsibilities to women. In such societies, women are discouraged from participating in leisure activities and instead spend time on household duties. In those societies where

women's leisure is defined or bound up with family time, such norms can even generate feelings of guilt for women when they participate in child-free leisure activities (Craig & Mullan, 2013). Yerkes et al. (2020) discussed this issue in terms of gender differences and quality of leisure by comparing more egalitarian countries with those that have conservative gender norms. Their findings showed that women have lower political power and also lower leisure quality compared to men in countries with conservative gender norms. Differently, in egalitarian countries, the gender gap in leisure quality was lower and as countries became more egalitarian, the gap decreased and eventually reversed. In more egalitarian countries, both males and females feel responsible for duties such as care work, consequently reducing the time pressure on women (Craig & Mullan, 2013).

Access to economic resources has also been identified as an important factor influencing leisure forms and practices when the choices of how people spend their free time is strongly influenced by income level (de Almeida & Gutierrez, 2011). Similarly, the outcomes of a study on leisure practices in Brazil showed that the majority of people with lower income occupied their leisure time with idleness, such as sleeping or staying at home, while people with higher income participated in tourist and outdoor activities (Uvinha et al., 2017). Examples also show how living in low-income neighbourhoods with no local park or concerns regarding safety can limit the opportunities to engage in leisure activities (Aliyas, 2019). With many families having small budgets and needing to prioritise their own survival and primary needs such food and health, leisure as a privilege will be left in the background (Marcellino, 2012).

Despite the distribution of wealth not being the only focus of social justice, it can still be considered as a "marker for other concerns to do with fairness, equality, exclusion, discrimination, power differentials and privilege" (Long et al., 2017, p. 1) particularly for women (Mkono et al., 2021; Rezania et al., 2021). Marphatia and Moussié (2013) discussed such challenges in terms of injustice issues by exploring the linkage between unpaid care work, education, and gender equality in Nepal. Their findings showed that young women with a higher rate of care work have lower educational levels as many needed to drop out of school. Unequal responsibilities for unpaid care work leave women with little or no time for education, health, and paid work. It is well argued that lower educational levels can reduce the chances of women to secure paid work (Floro & Komatsu, 2011), while the lack of financial resources limits their access to leisure (Uvinha et al., 2017). This is why in many cases, women's household responsibilities and role in sustaining family are not well recognised and their unpaid work is devalued (Palriwala & Neetha, 2011). Therefore, it is not surprising to see why women may feel having access to financial resources and paid work will give them greater economic independence, power, and respect when their contribution is recognised within the household (Kamp Dush et al., 2018; Marphatia & Moussié, 2013). Lack of recognition and limited resources such as education and income can reduce women socio-economic and political power in society. Such constraints contribute to gender power relations at the societal level, reducing women's power to negotiate more equal rights such as access and participation in leisure activities.

Identifying multiple injustice issues in relation to women's access and participation in leisure activities signifies the need for research to better encourage and support transformative change in society. Applying the concept of justice, however, requires addressing more than one injustice issue when women's access to leisure is constrained by issues such as lack of recognising values and needs, presence of power asymmetries in gender relations, and limited access to resources such as education and paid work.

3. Inclusive leisure through a social justice lens

Global crises such as COVID-19, climate change and financial crises have highlighted more than ever how the unequal structure of our society has negatively affected the most vulnerable individuals among us.

Rastegar et al. (2021) identified such crises as justice issues and noted that they exacerbate existing inequalities as they mainly affect the health and wellbeing of low-income nations and marginalised groups. Arguably then, there is an urgent need for society to address the injustice and inequality related to access to power, gender, culture, and income for many, particularly in less developed countries in the global south. Similarly, in the tourism and leisure landscape, Jeanes and Trussell (2021) in their book on leisure and social justice discussed the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on marginalised individuals and families noting, "critical, socially just analyses of family and the interrelationships between work, leisure, sport, and family life" (p.193). This is because leisure has been identified as an approach or avenue to empower marginalised groups (Frias & Dattilo, 2020), challenge discrimination (Lewis et al., 2019), and achieve social justice (Yuen & Fortune, 2020). This can happen when a just and equitable system "facilitates people's choices and opportunities to engage (or not) in a wide range of social and democratic activities, including sport and recreation" (Frisby & Ponic, 2013, p. 382). In this vein, leisure must be considered as a concept beyond just free time (activities). That is, "leisure is rather the structuring principle of ethic underneath free time (activities) since its scope is broader than activities and time alone. It is about becoming fully human" (Bouwer & Van Leeuwen, 2017, p. 112). Similarly, Frias and Dattilo (2020) discussed participation in leisure as a meaningful experience and process leading individuals to better lives. The connection to personal growth can be due to the fact that leisure helps individuals enhance their relationships and create the social capital that is required for wellbeing (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003). Considering the relationship between such meaningful experiences, well-being, and happiness, some have even granted leisure the status of a social right (Uvinha et al., 2017) or a human right (Dattilo, 2013).

Despite the role leisure can or should play in individuals' wellbeing, quality of life, empowerment, health, and personal growth (Chatzitheochari & Arber, 2012), many, particularly feminist researchers, identified this as a problematic concept for women. Research shows how household responsibilities are traditionally left to women or the ethic of care considering the needs of other family members first, can limit women's opportunity to access leisure (Jaumot-Pascual et al., 2018; Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003). Women's time constraints for leisure can be due to responsibilities such as childcare, organising family events, and other unpaid housework. Some have even argued that women's participation in leisure is not enjoyable when the women's role is just to cater to other family members (Kamp Dush et al., 2018; Marphatia & Moussié, 2013). The gender inequality in leisure is more evident in the global south when, for example, women in India spend on average 5.1 h on household responsibilities compared to 24 min by men (Budlender, 2007). The same issue was documented in South Africa where women spend twice the time on responsibilities such as collecting fuel, water and taking care of other family members, compared to men (Floro & Komatsu, 2011).

The leisure literature has well documented gender inequality and called for both research and practice that can offer solutions that contribute to leisure engagement and empowerment for women (e.g., Frias & Dattilo, 2020; Long et al., 2017; Lopez Frias & Dattilo, 2021; Trussell & Jeanes, 2021; Yerkes et al., 2020). However, it should be noted that for leisure to be able to play its role in women's development, fulfilment, and empowerment, it requires guiding principles to promote inclusive leisure for all. The research shows how even equal access to leisure may still fail to fulfil the criteria of inclusion when marginalised groups such as the disabled (Devine & Parr, 2008) or women (Yerkes et al., 2020) face constraints to have quality leisure experiences. Inclusive leisure therefore should go beyond simply providing access to leisure and should promote a meaningful engagement in leisure that can contribute to personal growth and wellbeing. Similarly, Frias and Dattilo (2020, p. 272), argued that "By using social justice as the foundation, inclusive leisure scholars and service providers offer resources that contribute to leisure engagement and empower participants to lead the

kind of lives they value".

Grounding leisure in the principles of social justice and inclusion not only helps avoid marginalisation of certain groups such as women but also determines the way in which leisure can promote their empowerment (Frias & Dattilo, 2020). Stewart (2014) highlighted the importance of establishing links between leisure research and actions to enhance social justice in society. To investigate such relationships in leisure research, he further identified three approaches—descriptive, explanatory, and transformative. From a descriptive perspective, leisure research on social justice mainly focuses on describing unjust situations whereas an explanatory approach explains why people treat other groups unjustly. While acknowledging the existence of injustice in leisure can be a necessary first step to raise awareness, a deeper understanding of the issues would be required to provide practical solutions to move towards social change (Long et al., 2017). Similarly, transformative approaches directly engage with marginalised groups and community with the aim to create a different world for such communities. However, creating such change would only be possible by bringing the principles of social justice to the centre of leisure scholarship and integrating justice research into leisure studies.

Despite the application of justice in leisure studies, "leisure and sport scholars have sometimes played fast and loose with notions of social justice, using it, and similar terms, to justify positions without proper consideration of what is entailed" (Wetherly et al., 2017, p. 15). For example, defining social justice through distributive paradigms by focusing on issues such as jobs and income has limited many researchers to consider critical factors beyond distribution contribution to justice issues (Rastegar & Ruhanen, 2021; Rastegar, 2020). Similarly, theories such as egalitarian theories of distributive justice are criticised for having an economic redistribution lens while ignoring recognition of differences among social groups such as gender and race (Trussell & Jeanes, 2021). Considering these issues in leisure is particularly important when some social groups such as women encounter marginalisation due to power asymmetry (Lopez Frias & Dattilo, 2021; Yerkes et al., 2020) or when their values, need and rights are not recognised (Marphatia & Moussié, 2013) in their local context. Such an approach to consider local norms and beliefs would be helpful to develop a deeper understanding of inequity and exclusion in leisure. To fully encompass injustice issues in leisure, particularly in less developed countries, the guiding principles of justice would be required to localise social justice (Higgins-Desbiolles & Bigby, 2021; Rastegar et al., 2021). Following this path forward, both in leisure research and practice, particularly in the global south, requires identifying and addressing the obstacles limiting inclusive and equitable leisure for women. Issues such as power asymmetries, unequal distribution of the costs, benefits and responsibilities, and recognition of rights, needs and values can influence women's access, quality, and experience of leisure. Navigating injustice issues and inequalities in constraining women in leisure can provide the opportunity to contribute to both the dialogue and practices to achieve social changes in the leisure landscape.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research context

Iran is a Middle Eastern country which has been governed by Islamic theocracy since the 1979 revolution. Women's rights are influenced by Islamic texts in which household responsibilities are mandated to be the main duties of women who need to be protected by their men (Abedinifard, 2019). This has resulted in men occupying undeniable positions of power that allow them to be a main decision maker for themselves and their families (Moghadam et al., 2009). Similarly, in a society where men have freedom to participate in different leisure activities, government policies and cultural barriers have resulted in injustice and inequality in women's leisure. For example, women are not allowed to enter all sports stadiums or major sporting events and group exercise in

public places is not culturally acceptable or restricted due to compulsory hijab and dress codes.

However, despite all discriminations, Iran is going through social change and transformation that challenges many traditional assumptions, particularly for women. The position of women in Iranian society in particular has changed from a very traditional family-based role in the early 20th century to the time between 1921 and 1979 when women started gaining access to education, voting and new dress code (Martin & Mason, 2006). Martin and Mason (2006) argued that the post-1979 revolution represents a more ambivalent position for women including compulsory Islamic dress code, emphasis on women's education, and establishment of Islamic rules which significantly reduced access and participation in leisure activities. More recently and particularly in the last twenty years, Iranian society has witnessed a power shift towards women's empowerment and gender equality (Nikjoo et al., 2021; Salehi et al., 2021). This shift is because of access to the Internet and the increasing number of educated women who are looking to change their lifestyle, and are becoming more interested in sport, the outdoors, and leisure activities (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Fadaee, 2018). In addition, increased government support and funding in recent years has focused on addressing women's increasing interest in competitive sport by creating specific places for recreation, leisure, and sport for women. For example, the opening of the first exclusively women's park in Tehran (called Mother's Paradise) in 2007 was an attempt by the government to provide women with access to leisure in public places. However, such attempts caused controversy as some called it 'an area of isolation and freedom' as a walled landscape may not address the issue of leisure inequality that has resulted from decades of strict gender segregation (Shirvani, 2017) and other social and cultural barriers (Rezania et al., 2021).

4.2. Data collection

Twenty-five in-depth interviews were conducted between October 2021 and January 2022 with women in Iran to understand their access and participation, as well as the challenges and constraints, to participate in leisure activities. Interviews explored the women's narrative of leisure activities, capturing their understanding and also their perception of the leisure inequality between women and men. We were particularly interested to explore how Iranian women identify and describe their leisure activities and constraints. Therefore, while having a social justice lens, we encouraged participants to share their own narrative, instead of imposing particular themes or definitions. The main questions were supplemented with further intrinsic probes.

Iranian women above 18 years of age who live in Iran were recruited as study participants. In conducting in-depth interviews, a purposive sampling technique was initially applied to ensure different groups of women were represented, including age, education, marital status, and occupation. This approach was supported by snowball sampling, which expands the number of participants as research moves forward, through the participants' social links (Singleton & Straits, 2017). Prior to conducting the interviews, all participants were provided with an information sheet that explained the research aims and process. All interviews were conducted through WhatsApp voice calls, due to COVID-19 restrictions, and were recorded with the permission of participants. The interviews lasted between 25 and 40 min, with an average of 37 min.

Data collection ceased when data saturation was achieved; that is, when additional data resulted in redundant information (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). The saturation was reached after collecting information from 25 participants. Women with different marital status, family life cycle 6 single women, 2 married women with no children, 4 married women with children under 6 years old (full nest 1), 5 married women with children 6 and above years old (full nest 2), 3 married women with children in college or work (full nest 3) and 5 married women with children no longer living with them (empty nest) and

different age groups (aged between 26 and 77) participated in this study. Women participating in this research had different occupations and levels of education (Table 1).

4.3. Data analysis

In analysing the data, deductive and inductive thematic analyses were employed to analyse data from the interviews. Analysing the data started with deductive thematic analysis which considered pre-existing themes from the literature, and then continued with inductive analysis to respond to emergent themes as they became available (Ritchie et al., 2013). The recorded interviews were transcribed and primarily analysed by the researcher who had conducted the interviews to reflect their richer understanding of the data. The thematic analysis of the interviews proceeded through different stages of manual coding and NVIVO 12.0. In analysing the data, we took the following steps of inductive and deductive thematical analysis (Table 2). The first step engaged reading through the entire dataset to get a broad sense of the main patterns and content. In the next step, initial codes were generated across the entire dataset. Coding involved assigning labels and organising the data to identify different themes. To improve the credibility and consistency of the analysis, coding was primarily conducted by one author, with final coding and themes being thoroughly discussed with the co-author. The themes were modified based on the identification of new emergent issues and themes from the participants' responses. Later, the final themes were labelled based on the aspects of the data. In the last step, the themes were employed to write up the discussion with regards to the

Table 1
Study participants.

Name	Age	Marital status	Family life Cycle	Education	Occupation
Afsaneh	41	Single	Single	Bachelor	Business Owner
Shila	76	Married	Empty nest (4 children)	Highschool	Household
Fereshteh	28	Married	Full nest 1 (1 child)	Master	Part-time admin
Mojgan	46	Married	Full nest 3 (2 Children)	Bachelor	Teacher
Sima	35	Married	Full nest 2 (2 Children)	Bachelor	Household
Nasim	41	Married	Full Nest 2 (1 child)	Bachelor	Household
Elham	26	Married	Couple	Master	Household
Pari	61	Married	Empty nest (5 Children)	University student	Household
Azadeh	28	Single	Single	Master	Business Owner
Sagar	31	Married	Full Nest 1 (1)	Bachelor	Household
Afarin	42	Single	Single	Master	Admin job
Nahid	53	Married	Full nest 2 (2 children)	Highschool	Household
Azar	69	Married	Empty nest	Highschool	Household
Narges	27	Married	Couple	Bachelor	Teacher
Neda	32	Single	Single	Bachelor	Household
Yasamin	41	Married	Full Nest 1	Master	Psychologist
Mona	58	Married	Empty Nest	Doctorate	Doctor
Negin	52	Married	Full Nest 2 (1 child)	Bachelor	Household
Farideh	28	Single	Single	Master	Office work
Shahla	77	Married	Empty Nest (5 children)	Bachelor	Household
Mahbubeh	45	Married	Full Nest 2 (3 children)	Master	Household
Arezu	35	Single	Single	Bachelor	Nurse
Hana	63	Married	Full Nest 3	Bachelor	Household
Behrokh	39	Married	Full Nest 1	Bachelor	Household
Shadi	48	Married	Full Nest 3	bachelor	Nurse

*All the names appearing in the study are pseudonyms.

Table 2
Steps and process of thematic analysis.

Step	Description of Process
1. Familiarising with the data	Reading through the entire dataset to get a broad sense of the main patterns and content.
2. Generating initial codes	Generating initial codes across the entire dataset.
3. Searching for themes	Collating codes, assigning labels and organising the data to identify different potential themes.
4. Reviewing themes	Discussing and reviewing the entire coding and themes with the co-author.
5. Modifying themes	Modifying the themes based on the identification of new emergent issues and themes from the participants' responses.
6. Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analyses to refine specifics of each theme, generating clear labels and names of each theme.
7. Write up	Employing the themes to write up the discussion with regards to the research aims and the existing literature.

research aims and the existing literature.

5. Findings and discussion

It should be noted that, while leisure has been conceptualised mainly by western scholars and culture in the last three decades, the meaning and interpretation of leisure for women in a developing country context might be different to how it is defined in a developed country. Leisure activity is defined as time not spent in paid work, domestic work, parental work, or personal maintenance (Veal, 2016), and most of the participants defined their leisure as activities such as meeting friends, participation in religious and spiritual activities, resting, sleeping or simply not performing any activity. Exploring Iranian women's access and participation in leisure activities four key themes emerged. In the next section, we discuss how the themes of 1) social norms and cultural traditions, 2) safety, 3) household and parental responsibilities, and 4) the impacts of the pandemic were all found to be critical factors Iranian women's leisure experiences (Fig. 1).

5.1. Society norms and culture traditions

Most of the participants believed that women should have equal access to leisure activities; however, they acknowledge that in Iran, due to traditions and rules, men usually have more freedom than they do. For example, Neda who loves adventure sports stated, *"few years ago, I went to do bungee jumping but they told me that only men are allowed to do this activity. I am not sure about now."* She expressed her disappointment by explaining that due to religious rules, some adventure activities for women were banned.

Even where there is equal access for women, due to constraints such as cultural mythology, women may not participate in the activities equally, or their equal participation does not guarantee quality leisure for women. The perception of specific activities as appropriate for a particular gender is a culturally based determination that varies among ethnic groups (Tirone & Pedlar, 2000). Further social disapproval of activities considered to be inappropriate can be a type of interpersonal constraint, as is social control of women's leisure by family members in Iran *(Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007)*. Azadeh, an educated women and business owner stated: *"Men use their leisure time better because not only they have access to more leisure activities, but also, they can go whenever they want to go, and they can stay as long as they want to (based on social norms and culture)."* Several other participants also expressed the impacts of society norms, and cultural tradition on selecting leisure activities.

There is no evidence in Islamic texts, traditions, or policies that restrict women's leisure. On the contrary, Islam has emphasised the importance of happiness, health, and sport in society (Saadatifard et al., 2021). The importance of leisure can also be seen in pre-Islam Iranian traditions which includes different celebrations and festivals throughout the year such as *Nowruz* (New Year), *Yalda (*the longest night of the year)*, and Chaharshanbe *Suri* (Festival of Fire). Individuals' opinion and incorrect interpretation of the Islamic principles and cultural traditions, however, has led to the decisions limiting women's access and participation in leisure activities. Such examples are strict rules on women's dress and behaviour in public enforced by the morality police in the country. Similar interpretations have given men a dominant position of
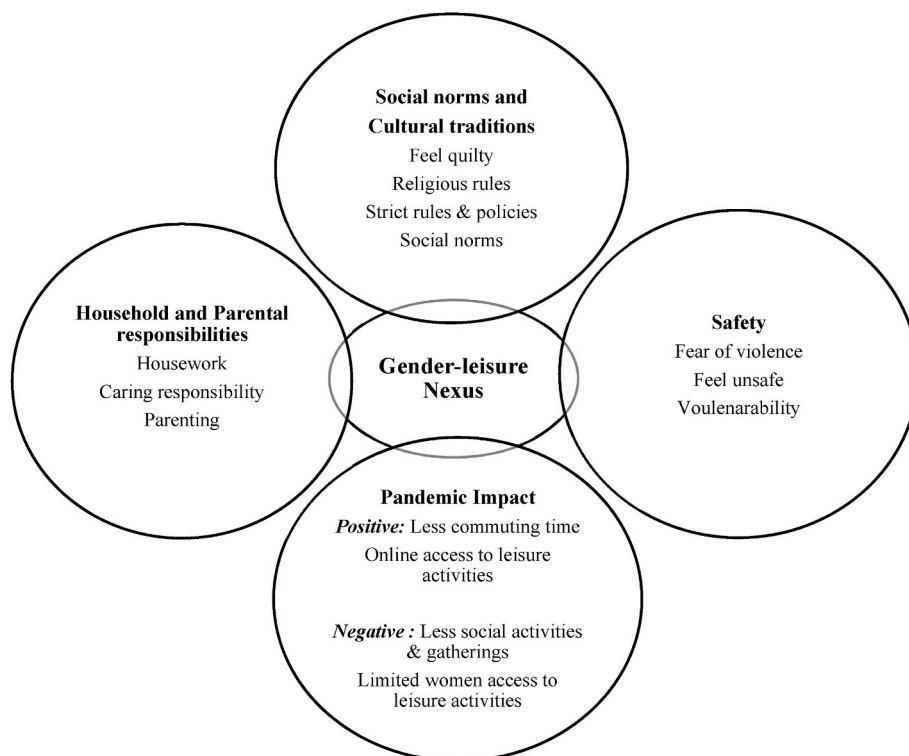
Fig. 1. *A thematic conceptualisation of gender-leisure nexus.*

decision-making power while limiting women's contribution and freedom. It is now revealed how such gender drivers can influence women's social participation and wellbeing in Iran (Salehi et al., 2021). It can therefore be argued that religion as a social force in society has given power to some groups (men and policymakers) to compel women to follow certain behaviors. Such individual-centered policy making that focuses on traditional rules particularly limits women's access to leisure in smaller, more traditional communities in the country.

Our findings also revealed that the cultural ideology that women are more apt to be caring affects women's leisure. The sentiments in the interviews showed how such duty of care can even led to women's feelings of guilt. For example, Nasim who has an eight-year-old daughter stated: "*I am planning to go back to work next year, after my daughter starts school; right now, she loves to spend time with me, and I prefer not leaving her.*" Although in most of the families, couples are more likely to share responsibilities, gendered norms and expectations in Iran still privilege men's breadwinning status and women's homemaking skills. Moreover, from a cultural perspective, stereotypical male activities are typically more highly valued in society when compared to women's activities (England et al., 2002). It can also be argued that "women are imbued with an ethic of care that leads them to take care of other people and consider the needs of others first, often at the expense of their own freedom from work and freedom for leisure" (Harrington et al., 1992). Nahid with two children, expressed her feeling by stating: "*I have left my kids with my mother-in-law a few times to spend time for myself, but I felt so guilty. I have called my mother-in-law a few times to check my kids, although I was sure they had a good time with their grandmother. I was always thinking, do my kids have fun? What are they doing now?*" Similar findings were reported in other studies when Iranian women expressed a feeling of betraying their children when they were away for leisure and therefore had a self-driven restriction to participate in leisure activities (Rezania et al., 2021). While women are less likely to have child-free leisure, when they participate in leisure without children, modern 'intensive mothering' norms can generate feelings of guilt (Craig & Mullan, 2013). Therefore, it is possible that women are viewed, or view themselves, as less deserving of free time and experience more guilt when they take time for themselves. Hence, in many cultures including Iran, an 'ideal woman' is one who selflessly sacrifices her needs for her family and works hard at home. It should also be noted that many of the participants emphasized the value of family. This value can find its roots in religious and cultural beliefs when many women consider spending time at home with family as an activity that helps family bonding.

5.2. Safety issues

Social security and personal safety were other factors affecting women's leisure activities. Research shows that a lack of safety produces fear which reflects an internal psychological condition or emotional state that occurs within an individual (e.g., Aliyas, 2019). Our findings showed that women felt more vulnerable to attack and violence in spaces within society, particularly in low-income neighbourhoods. For example, one of our participants, Afarin, claimed: "One of my favorite activities is walking and listening to music. I do leisure-walking during summer but in winter, it gets dark sooner and I do not feel safe to go out for a walk."

To negotiate a fear of violence, women often modified their participation in leisure activities by reducing their night participation, participating with other individuals, or changing the location where they participated in the activity (Coble et al., 2003). However, the findings of our study showed that due to the lack of safety, some participants skipped the health and fitness benefits, and the experience of self-reliance. For example, one participant stated that she avoids leisure-walking during winter evenings. Similar sentiments were seen in the interview with participants who believed that safety was their own or their parents' and partners' concerns. For example, Narges, a married woman, said: "I cannot participate in some leisure activities alone, such as hiking. Actually, my husband is concerned about my safety." *She also validated her husband's claim by adding:* "Hiking alone is

so dangerous for women; we heard about the number of assaults against women during hiking". *In addition, in many of the Iranian families particularly in smaller cities it is not culturally accepted for a woman to stay out after dark. For example, Negin a 52-year-old married stated that her leisure activities are limited to what she can do during the day. She expressed her unhappiness by stating:* "I need to be home soon, before dark, before my husband arrives from work".

Our finding is consistent with other research arguing that women live in an environment of fear about what they should and should not do; where and when they should be afraid; and who is safe and who is dangerous (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007). Parental, societal, and media warnings diffuse a fear of being attacked or exposed to violence in public places. Media reports of women being attacked sensitize women to the possibility of being a crime target. The findings reveal how women's feelings of vulnerability and safety concerns can severely restrict opportunities to engage in leisure activities. It should however be noted that such issues are not only limited to developing countries such as Iran, as other studies also have reported the issue of safety and women discrimination in more developed countries (e.g., Kloek et al., 2013).

5.3. Household/parental responsibility

Findings of this research showed that household and parental responsibilities are important factors impacting participation and enjoyment of leisure activities mainly for married women or women with children. For example, Mahbubeh, a married women with three kids, stated; "*I have no time for leisure activities; I am doing household [work] during school hours and when kids are home, I will help them with homework.*" Similarly, Behrokh explained how she usually spent the whole day with her child, "*I have no time for myself; my daughter is so dependent and [I] spend most of my time with her.*"

Most of the 'single' participants in our study claimed that they use their leisure time for enrichment, reflection, and enjoyment; as one of the participants stated: "*My leisure time needs to be result-oriented, so I use my leisure time to do something that helps me achieving a goal at the end of the year, for example, becoming fit*" (Arezu). It was also noted that, single women have higher leisure quality, which they use for self-development, than those with a partner and children. It can therefore be argued that women with less household responsibility and without parental responsibility may use their leisure time for personal fulfilment (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003). The findings also show that the quantity (time) and quality of leisure activities are higher for single women. The findings showed that married women experience fewer leisure times than single women. For example, Sima, a married woman, claimed; "*It is difficult to find time for leisure activities, I love photography, but I hardly can find time for it.*"

Though literature indicates that household and parental responsibilities impact both partners and parents (Kamp Dush et al., 2018), the findings of this research showed that even in the cases when women engage in work responsibility and equally contribute to the household income, men are usually less involved in household or parental responsibilities. This finding can be explained by the dependent labour theory of gender inequality (Shaw, 1985) suggesting that stronger impacts of housework on women leisure compared to men exist. Although, through leisure time, women can escape some of the more tedious aspects of life and realise opportunities for personal growth (Mattingly & Bianchi, 2003), our findings highlighted the tension created by women's household and/or caregiving responsibilities even during leisure activities. For example, one of our participants said: "*I always feel rushed when I am with my friends. I keep my phone close to myself to make sure not missing any call from my husband or kids*" (Hana). Research also showed that women clearly experience more time pressure during leisure (e.g., Chatzitheochari & Arber, 2012) due to their sense of responsibility and care giving.

For Iranian women, the boundaries between household and parental

responsibilities and leisure time pursuits are often blurred. Some women take families with them or prefer to organise family gatherings during their leisure time. In such situations, women's caring roles continue during their leisure activity, often under less convenient and more stressful conditions. One of our participants explained: *"When we have families and friends gathering in our leisure time, even during gathering time, we (women) still do cooking, cleaning and taking care of kids. I feel responsible for everything, it is really stressful."* (Sima). A similar finding was reported in a study on women's leisure dilemmas in Iran showing the lack of boundary between house chores and leisure activities for married women (Rezania et al., 2021). Women's enjoyment and experience of leisure time activities may be compromised by their responsibility to ensure the quality of leisure experiences for others. There is particularly more burden on women compared to men to take care of other family members (Yoder, 2006). Women tend to be the co-ordinators of family life and therefore it is often difficult for them to have time for themselves, independent of household responsibilities.

The recent conservative government strongly encourages Iranian's women to bear children by offering a range of financial and other incentives (IRNA, 2022) and also severely restricting access to abortion, contraception and access to family planning services (Guardian, 2020). Some Iranian women believe such policies are interfering with their private life and have created new barriers for women's entry into the workforce and independence. For example, Fereshteh, a 28-year-old married woman stated that *"It is not fair to women, that is the decision we have to make, it is affecting our lives and freedom, it is about everything we can and cannot do"*. In addition, the national data support this by showing that Iranian women spend most of their time on housekeeping duties and care giving (SCI, 2016). Thus, women's free time activities may often be undertaken for the purpose of contributing to family well-being or cohesion, rather than for their own relaxation or leisure, despite recent studies in Iran showing the importance of leisure and physical activities in women health, wellbeing, and quality of life (Rezania et al., 2021; Salehi et al., 2021). The findings of such studies further reveal that lack of opportunity to participate in outdoor and leisure activities can lead to unhealthy lifestyle behaviours such as use of drugs, smoking and drinking among Iranian women (Salehi et al., 2021).

5.4. The COVID-19 pandemic

COVID-19 had different impacts on the participants' leisure activities. Some of the participants believed that the pandemic provided them with more opportunities to participate in leisure activities and with better quality. With most activities moved online during the pandemic, some of our participants claimed that it saved their commuting time and so made most of online activities such as online exercise and yoga which became more accessible for them. For example, Afsaneh, a business owner, said, *"I always wanted to do Yoga, but it was difficult to find time to join the classes. During COVID-19, I joined online Yoga lessons which I always wished for, I could simply do that from home."* She also said that *"I have more leisure time now (during COVID-19) to do what I like, and everything is online."* Or Shahla, a married women with five children and in her empty nest family life stage, claimed: *"COVID-19 has positive impact for me, I have access to every class online. I was not able to go to my TRX class regularly, but now I am doing it online, two times a week."* This phenomenon can be considered as a positive change particularly as previous research (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007) and the national survey (SCI, 2016) showed that sport participation was very low for Iranian women when it was considered as the least two activities performed by this group.

However, the findings revealed that the pandemic has also negatively affected some of the participants. Women who preferred to engage in social activities for their leisure found COVID-19 to be a barrier to their leisure activities and social life. Pari, a married women with four children and in the empty nest family life cycle stage, explained; *"One of my favorite things to do in my leisure time was families gathering, we met*

each other each week, but we could not do that during COVID-19, it is so sad and depressing."* Or for example, Azadeh who is a business owner and single, said: *"I loved seeing and doing activities with my friends on weekends, but we did not see each other for almost two years because of COVID."*

In addition, the findings of this study also showed that crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic can affect access to leisure for men and women differently. Our findings revealed discrimination and unequal access to leisure activities during the pandemic. Farideh, a single woman, said; *"There is no equal access between men and women to leisure activities, lots of sports is for men. For example, horse riding, they do not have classes for women during the pandemic, they had to reduce the number of classes, now those limited lessons are for men only"*. Our finding is somewhat consistent with Arab-Moghaddam et al.'s (2007) and Rezania et al.'s (2021) works on women's leisure constraints reporting that Iranian women perceived the lack of government policy and concern about women's leisure as an important issue. Our findings also revealed that during a crisis, leisure activity can be overshadowed by economic factors. For example, one participant expressed her view by stating: "*Many people like my husband lost their job and income during the pandemic, we need to think of more necessary and urgent needs, cannot afford to participate in leisure activities, it is a luxury*!". The same point was highlighted by Rastegar et al. (2021) who concluded that crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic can extrapolate existing inequalities particularly for marginalised groups such as women.

6. Conclusion and implications

While social changes are underway and challenging many traditional assumptions, Iranian women still face many constraints in accessing and participating in leisure activities. The findings of our study demonstrated how issues such as *societal norms, government policies, cultural mythology* and traditions*, household and parental responsibility, and* personal safety can limit women's leisure in Iran. In addition, while the sentiments showed the negative impacts of the pandemic on women's leisure, the presence of such issues can be entrenched in other sociocultural contextual barriers such as women's economic dependence on their spouse (Rezania et al., 2021) or society's and family's expectations of a woman when more important matters should take precedence—not women's leisure (Arab-Moghaddam et al., 2007; Rezaie et al., 2017). It is particularly important when, in countries such as Iran, women's choices are steeped in cultural and norm-related ideologies about what leisure means and the types of behaviours that are appropriate for women and men in society (Rezaie et al., 2017; Tsai, 2010). Iranian women traditionally focus on the family's internal affairs to maintain the relations inside the family.

The findings of our study revealed how women can suffer from stress when they feel solely responsible for household duties. Perceived ethics of care over-burdened women, constrains their access to leisure, and negatively affects their wellbeing. Research shows that women can suffer from depression and anxiety, when they have minimal time to exercise—a critical activity linked to positive mental and physical health outcomes (Wegner et al., 2014). Both cultural barriers and lack of family support are important factors preventing Iranian women's participation in leisure activities. However, it should also be noted that the ethics of care and household responsibilities are accentuated in particular ethnic groups, or in specific social and economic classes. Similar examples can be seen in the cases where African American women in the United States (Joseph et al., 2015) or rural communities in Spain (Aristegui et al., 2015) have been found to be more constrained by caregiving roles and responsibilities.

Our research showed that Iranian women define and experience in ways that range from the time spent every day with family and friends to outdoor or physical activities and entertainment. Previous research has showed that outdoor and physical activities directly help women experience empowerment through connection with others (Henderson & Gibson, 2013) while also positively affecting their health and wellbeing

(Paggi et al., 2016). Therefore, educating families about the importance of women's wellbeing and the relationships between participation in leisure and physical activities and reducing stress are imperative. Training programs should promote gender equality in society while encouraging men to accept more household responsibilities and care giving. However, such programs should avoid promoting the western definition of leisure, but instead the agenda must be to focus on local context, religion, and culture to advocate for women's rights and their needs in leisure in Iran. For example, both Islam and pre–Islam Iranian traditions emphasise the importance of happiness, wellbeing, and leisure for all individuals. Such agenda for change must consider the important role of family and society in shifting social relations towards a more just society for women.

Our research also revealed that access and quality of leisure can be restricted by those in the position of controlling the distribution of resources at both the family and society level. National and cultural norms and policies influence men and women's behaviour through socialization and role expectations, even passing on socially constructed norms across generations (Holland, 2013). It should be acknowledged that while women's leisure in Iran is mainly a cultural concern, it can be intertwined with other issues such as political and religious forces in the country (Shirvani, 2017). For example, when it comes to policymaking and implementation regarding women's leisure, the legal system has proven to be non-functional against the religious system (Rezania et al., 2021). Such an issue affecting women's leisure cannot be tackled until power differences in society are addressed. Organisations or individuals in position of power should realise that achieving social justice in leisure requires providing an opportunity for 'others' to have their say while being open to alternative voices (Long et al., 2017). However, the real change will happen when Iranian women can have greater impact and a say in the matters that affect their livelihoods. Here we argue that Iranian women themselves must have the power to be involved in decision making. It might still be a long way for this ideology to become reality even though more educated Iranian women are achieving top management positions. Nevertheless, as Iran is witnessing an increasing interest in sport and leisure activities among women, leisure itself can be used as a tool to enact social change, reduce marginalisation, and promote inclusion in society.

We realise that this research is not free from limitations as it focused on a particular cultural context and the findings may not be generalisable across other settings. However, acknowledging the complexity and potential of women's leisure, this research provided a different cultural perspective and a deeper understanding of Iranian women's leisure experiences and challenges. Having a social justice lens, this work tried to provide the opportunity for this marginalised group to express their feelings and experiences of leisure, and also the constraints they are facing both at family and society level. It is beyond the capacity of this research to discuss and address all leisure-related issues Iranian women are facing in their everyday lives. However, this work now suggests new lines of research by encouraging more interpretative studies to expand our understanding about leisure for and about women. Such research should address the issues of recognition, values and ideologies, and power asymmetries to integrate justice in women's leisure, particularly in the global south.

We should acknowledge that at the time of writing this manuscript, Iranian women are leading a movement and are at the frontline of the protests against the compulsory hijab, oppression and violence against women. We hope this work is a small step in amplifying the voices of Iranian women and societal change for equality.

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